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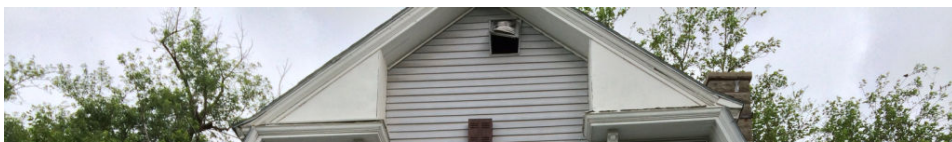
## In north Omaha, art briefly brings condemned homes to life

By Casey Logan / World-Herald staff writer Jul 19, 2014



WATIE WHITE

Pictures is public art created by Watie White and placed in the windows of condemned houses tell the stories of those who lived there.



Oretha Walker never took a phone call like this.

On the other end of the line was an artist asking about her childhood home in north Omaha.

Had she ever lived at 1468 Emmet St.? Did she have any memories she'd be willing to share?

Walker, now 41, grew up at the house in question. She moved there with her mother and siblings at age 7. It was a different place back then, she said, before the neighborhood was torn apart by gangs and violence.

"There was a community there," Walker said of her old block. "Now it's a ghost town."

Today, Habitat for Humanity owns the house at 1468 Emmet, and it is scheduled for demolition. The same goes for the condemned house next door at 1470 Emmet St., gutted by a fire and left to decay.

But before they're torn down, artist Watie White is giving them a temporary rebirth. Working in collaboration with Habitat, White created the second installment of his "All That Ever Was, Always Is" public art project. It officially opens today with a reception at 10:30 a.m. and stays up through October, with a series of community talks scheduled along the way. It follows a similar project last year at 2424 Emmet St., which has since been demolished.

Like that one, dozens of portraits line the windows of the homes at 1468 and 1470 Emmet — at once presenting a view of their past and a glimpse of what it might have been like to look out.

There are differences, though. In his first installment, White worked on a home full of abandoned possessions. He eventually tracked down one family member, who wanted nothing to do with the project. White faced an ethical dilemma but decided to press on, doing his best to create a representational work about the house and the people who called it home before leaving it behind.

"A lot of this project is in response to the idea that these houses have no value," White said, "the idea that you could build value in everything they touched. I tried to give weight to that. And the biggest part of that is the people."

For the latest project, White pored through the houses for clues about their past lives. At one point, he discovered a name scrawled on a dresser in a child's handwriting.

White learned the little girl, now an adult, still lived in north Omaha. He tracked her down, which is how Oretha Walker came to share her family's history — like any family, a mix of good and bad stories. She told White about the old neighborhood as she remembered it growing up. She spoke of the diversity of its residents, the block parties held each year and the Hells Angels down the street who looked over the neighborhood.

Most affectionately, she spoke of her mother, Jessie Tribble, who lived in the home until she died in 2011. Walker even agreed to pose as her mother for White's paintings, with one of her own daughters impersonating the younger version of her.

"It means a lot," Walker said. "Just recognizing my mother, who was a single parent. She raised us. For someone to come in and do something like this, I just want to thank them."



One house over, at 1470 Emmet St., White didn't have a first-person source to interview. He relied on objects left behind and the stories of people who came in contact with the home, including the firefighters who battled its blaze a few years ago.

"The social engagement part of it, and the interactive part of it, are just as important as the making of the art," White said.

He found a silent film playbill from 1918 in one of the baseboards and painted sepia-toned portraits of its featured actors, including Iowa native Margarita Fischer.

One day, White peeled back a layer of wallpaper and uncovered another name — his father's name — once written by a man who also was called John White. The coincidence was too incredible to disregard. White painted two portraits of his father, who died in 2006, and incorporated them into the installation.

He hopes the installation will bring people into a largely forgotten corner of north Omaha. He hopes it will make people look at such vacant houses differently, perhaps connecting them with their own past, present and future. He hopes they see the humanity within even the most lifeless old homes.

"Everything contains a really rich history," White said. "Really ordinary lives have the same stories as our greatest myths. The things we think are the most important ... are echoed in things all around us."

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### "All That Ever Was, Always Is"

What: Public art installation by Watie White in collaboration with Habitat for Humanity

Where: 1468 and 1470 Emmet St.

When: Opening reception 10:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. today. Additional talks will be scheduled in August, September and October (dates TBA).

Info: [watiewhite.com](http://watiewhite.com)

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